DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 143 012 CS 203 558

TITLE Writing for Consumers: Guidelines on Style and Content for Preparing HUD Publications. HUD Handbook No. 55502.

INSTITUTION Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, D.C.

PUB DATE Jan 77

NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Check Lists; *Consumer Education; *Expository Writing; Federal Government; *Government Publications; *Guidelines; *Language Styles; *Technical Writing

IDENTIFIERS *Department of Housing and Urban Development

ABSTRACT

These guidelines are directed to writers of United States Department of Housing and Urban Development publications intended for public distribution. The primary purpose of the guidelines is to improve writing style and to increase sensitivity to the consumer viewpoint. Section one discusses the following topics: looking at the subject from a consumer's perspective, giving the writing a sharp focus, presenting complete information, obtaining consumer input before writing, organizing the material, reaching out personally to the reader, writing simply, using graphics, and pretesting the publication. Other sections offer brief guidelines for writing for client groups and suggest checking with the person who first drafted the publication before rewriting it or changing its content. An appendix provides a checklist derived from the guidelines for writing for consumers. (GW)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

5550.2

ED143012

WRITING FOR CONSUMERS

GUIDELINES ON STYLE AND CONTENT FOR PREPARING HUD PUBLICATIONS

JANUARY 1977

A HUD HANDBOOK

CS 202 S5SP

CONSUMER AFFAIRS AND REGULATORY FUNCTIONS

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20410

MCL: DISTRIBUTION: W-1, W-2, W-3, W-3-1, R-1, R-4, R-5

FORWARD

Do you write or prepare material for pamphlets, fact sheets, booklets, or other publications aimed at consumers? These guidelines are offered to assist you in making sure that your message is getting across and that it is sensitive to the consumer viewpoint.[1/]

One of HUD's five national goals is "to assure that the basic rights of consumers are considered and respected in all housing and community development activities." Effective communication is a basic building block in reaching that goal.

1/ We acknowledge with appreciation the assistance given to us by many of HUD's experienced writers and editors in the development of these guidelines.

GUIDELINES

Section 1. Writing for Consumers

1. PERSPECTIVE. Look at the subject from a consumer's perspective. "Think consumer."

   a. You are writing a publication intended for the consuming public. Then keep the ultimate consumer and his needs foremost in your mind. The "ultimate consumer" is the user of services and products--you and I when we're buying a house, having trouble paying the mortgage, and coping with settlement procedures. Though it sounds simple, this is the key element in preparing effective consumer publications.

   b. Here are two examples that miss the mark:

      - A brochure, "Having Problems Paying Your Mortgage?", explains procedures such as forebearance to avoid losing your home through foreclosure.

        Problem: HUD has received a number of complaints about a section in the brochure which encourages people to deed their homes to lenders. Alternatives should have been suggested, such as mentioning that the owner can sell the house himself.

      - A handbook was drafted for housing managers.

        Problem: It left out any discussion of tenants.

2. FOCUS. Give the piece a sharp focus.

   a. Who is your reader? With some HUD publications, it's hard to tell who the target audience is supposed to be, and this usually diminishes the publication's effectiveness. Consider whether you need two separate publications, one for the consumer, and another for those who supply services, such as lending institutions, real estate agents, developers, housing managers.

   b. What is the publication supposed to accomplish? Is it general background material on a new law or program, or specific advice to the individual, or action advice to a group?

HUD-Wash., D. C.

c. Thinking through these two points will help to shape the publication.

3. COMPLETENESS. Present complete information.

a. Be honest in facing both the pros and cons of the subject. Striking a balance that gives the full story of any negatives as well as the positives serves the reader and enhances HUD's credibility.

- Example of Complete Information: "Questions about Condominiums," a brochure for consumers, mentions potential difficulties a consumer might face with some developers.

- Example of Incomplete Information: "Buying and Financing a Mobile Home" does not caution the reader that mobile homes, in contrast with conventional property, typically depreciate over the years.

4. CONSUMER INPUT. Talk to consumers before you start to write.

a. In addition to HUD program experts and other sources of information, draw on consumer groups for their insights into readers' needs and for the data they can also provide. You will receive the most constructive help, we've found, if you establish a personal contact with one person within the group and if that person sees you as fairminded. If you would like aid in identifying potential contacts, the Consumer Affairs Office would be delighted to help.

5. ORGANIZATION. Approach the material and its organization as if you were a newcomer to the subject.

a. Walk through the material in your imagination. Introduce the reader to the subject, then to the need for a government role in the area, then to how the program works.

- Example: The Interstate Land Sales brochure, "Get the Facts Before Buying Land," is confusing and disorganized. For example, it talks about the Property Report but never describes it.

HUD-Wash., D. C.

6. PERSONALIZE. Reach out personally to the reader with the very first paragraph.

   a. Start with a paragraph, preferably using the "you" form, that addresses the reader directly. Catch his attention by making it obvious immediately that he has a stake in the information you are presenting.

      • Example: First Paragraph before

      Section 518(b) of the National Housing Act, as amended in 1976, authorizes the Secretary of HUD to correct, or to reimburse owners for the correction of structural or other major defects in some homes purchased on or after August 1, 1968, and prior to January 1, 1973, if the mortgages were insured by the FHA.

      • Example: First Paragraph after

      If your home has a serious defect that endangers your life or safety, you may be eligible for assistance from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in making the necessary repairs. But the reimbursement will be made only if you bought your home after August 1, 1968, and before January 1, 1973, and if the mortgage is insured by FHA.

7. WRITING STYLE. Write simply.

   a. Write essentially the kind of language people speak. That does not, however, mean talking down to the reader.

   b. Avoid pretentious words. Try "use," not "utilize"; "having difficulty," not "experiencing difficulty"; "because," not "due to the fact"; "reading," not "perusing." And there are half a dozen good words to use instead of "finalize," ("complete," "finish," "end," "conclude" are a few).

   c. Avoid long, convoluted sentences. Keep sentences short, and use the active voice rather than the passive.

      • Example: Before

      Only those occupants who are unable to obtain suitable alternative housing will be eligible to remain in temporary housing for the full twelve months.

HUD-Wash., D. C.

- Example: After

  You may stay in temporary housing for the full twelve months only if you cannot find suitable housing.

d. Keep paragraphs short, each focused on a single subject.

e. Keep it lively. Dullness is not profundity.

f. You might decide to use technical terms in your publication because in that way you arm the reader when he goes to talk with a supplier of services. But if you use those terms, define them! A good technique is to introduce the concept in normal English, then add the technical term afterwards within parentheses.

- Example: "Falling behind in your mortgage payments (delinquency)"

g. If you refer to a section of a law by number (e.g., Section 518) explain it.

h. Avoid abbreviations, especially bureaucratic acronyms. Spell them out.

i. Use examples and anecdotes, if possible, which allow the reader to identify with the subject matter.

- Example: This is what we have tried to do throughout these guidelines.

j. Be wary of phrasing which may give the impression, though unintended, of insensitivity.

- Example of a paragraph deleted from a draft article about self-help housing for a special target group:

  "From the beginning, it was recognized that only a fraction of any population group has the stamina and motivation to work during most of their free time for extended periods."

8. GRAPHICS. Let graphics bear some of the message.

a. Can you create a chart to illustrate your subject, such as steps homeowners can take to avoid foreclosure?

b. Vary type faces, use good lay-out and design to engage the reader's interest, and graphics to untangle complex concepts.

c. Work from the beginning of your project with the graphic design section, so that the text and artwork are tied together.

9. PRE-TESTING. Pre-test the publication.

a. Pre-test a copy on a sample segment of your target audience, if your time and budget permit.

b. Send a draft version to consumer and community groups for review, as well as to other interested parties.

c. Experts in HUD's Headquarters and out in the field offices should also have a chance for review.

d. It is fair to provide a due date by which you need to have these responses, to avoid delay in finishing the publication.

Section 2. Writing for Client Groups

Publications intended for groups who supply services should also reflect a concern for the consumer interest.

- Example: in a brochure intended for developers, which explains "Financing Condominiums," a paragraph would be welcome explaining the safeguards and protection afforded consumers by these programs.

Section 3. Note to Editors and Re-Writers

Change the style of a piece if necessary, but not the content without checking back with the program person who first drafted the publication.

HUD-Wash., D. C.

WRITING FOR CONSUMERS - CHECKLIST

1. THINK CONSUMER

   use appropriate language
   define terms
   what are their needs?

2. FOCUS

   who are your readers?
   if there is more than one audience, should there be a publication for each?

   what is the purpose of the publication?

   general background of material
   describing a new program
   a how-to-do-it book
   action plan for a group

3. COMPLETE INFORMATION

   list resources and contacts
   define pros and cons of the subject
   get quotations from a variety of sources, attempting to balance

4. TALK BEFORE YOU WRITE

   HUD Program experts
   trade association representatives
   industry
   consumers

5. ORGANIZING

   Organize the material as if you are a newcomer to the subject

6. WRITING

   reach out to the reader in the first paragraph, address him directly, using "you"

HUD-Wash., D. C.

write simply:

avoid long, convoluted sentences
keep paragraphs short, focusing on a single subject
keep it lively, use examples and anecdotes
define technical terms and sections of the law (221(d)(3))
avoid abbreviations and acronyms

7. GRAPHICS

use whenever possible - look for ways to include good graphics in the publication - consider charts, drawings, photographs

vary type face, lay-out and design

8. PRE-TEST

pre-test the publication on a sample of your target audience
send draft to consumer and community groups for review
send draft to HUD's Headquarters and field offices